The Land Beneath Our Feet

Footsteps clatter, traffic rumbles past, small children run and jump; the land beneath our feet feels every movement, it has many secrets to share. If you could travel back through time you might experience a very different Tottenham, but you would spot many familiar names and places, each with a story to tell. This exhibition shines a light on just some of those stories using textiles, artefacts, paintings and archive materials to reveal more about our local area. At the heart of the exhibition is the '1619 Dorset Survey' and the beautiful pictorial map created from it - the earliest known map of Tottenham and Wood Green.

The Dorset Survey takes its name from Richard Sackville, 3rd Earl of Dorset. His grandfather, Thomas, served under Elizabeth I and the family became influential courtiers and wealthy landowners, acquiring the Manor of Tottenham in 1604. Inheriting his title at the age of just twenty years old, Richard Sackville was a gambler whose love of spending led to large debts. In 1619, at the age of thirty, he commissioned a survey to record the value of his lands.

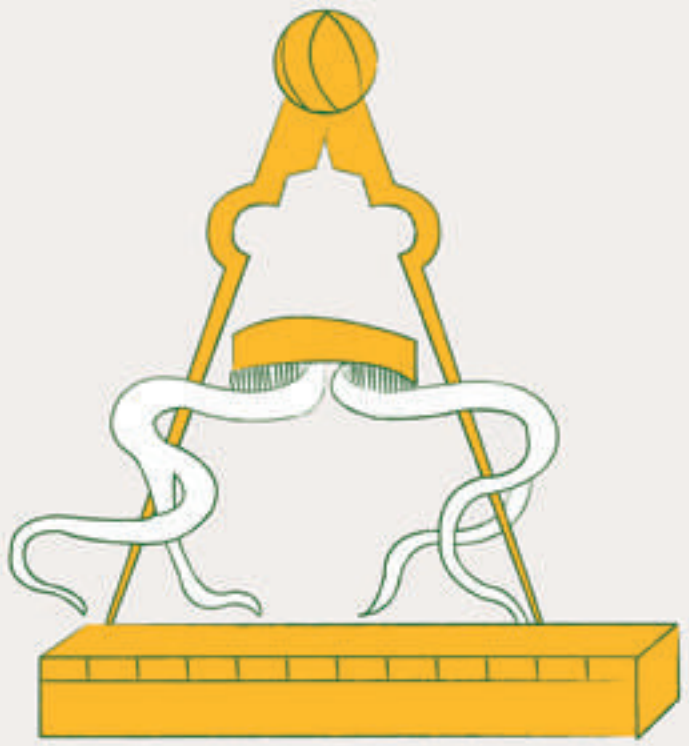
The survey comprised two parts - a hand drawn plan and a field book which recorded the names of people who leased or possessed land within the parish of Tottenham with a detailed description of the land, any associated buildings, and most importantly the monetary value.

The original 17th century field book, though incomplete, still survives today. It is held at the London Metropolitan Archives with a transcript available at Haringey Archive Service. The whereabouts of the original plan are unknown.

Creating the Map

The original field book and plan were undertaken by Thomas Clay, a 17th century surveyor. His plan is believed to have still been in existence in the early 1800s with copies being created for inclusion in William Robinson's 1840 book The History and Antiquities of Tottenham. It was common for early maps to be printed in black and white and then hand-coloured leading to subtle variations in every copy.

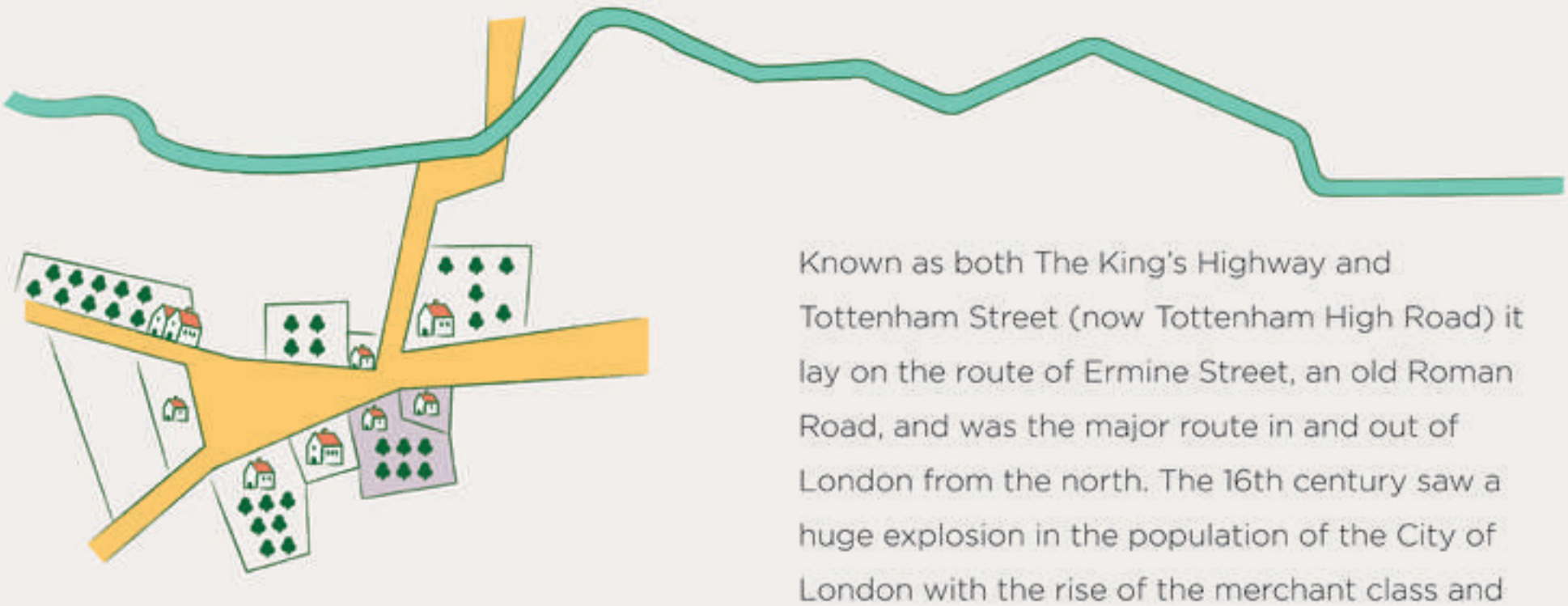
The reproductions in Robinson's books provide us with a visual record of the whole area, detailing not just ownership of land but prominently displaying the course of the rivers and roads around which settlements grew. It was common at the time to depict waterways in blue, houses as cream buildings with red tiled roofs and areas of woodland with trees, but standard conventions for scale and orientation did not exist. In comparison with modern maps, Clay's work is upside down, the plan depicting South Tottenham at the top with north Tottenham stretching towards Edmonton at the bottom. It is likely that the map was positioned in this way for purely aesthetic reasons enabling space at the top for the ornate features which decorate the edge of the page.



To the top-left is an elaborate cartouche detailing the purpose of the map, and on the right-hand side the Earl of Dorset's Coat of Arms reinforces his status and asserts his right to the land. In the lower left-hand corner is a pair of dividers, a compass like instrument for marking out measurement. On a small scroll underneath, Thomas Clay has recorded his name and the date 1619, alongside a 'Scale of Perches'. The perch was a unit of measurement and although the surveying methods available to Clay were basic by today's standards a comparison with later ordnance survey maps demonstrates a remarkable accuracy.

The Rivers and Roads

The shape of Tottenham and its main thoroughfares have seen remarkably little change in 400 years. Development was determined by the physical environment with Tottenham's eastern edge bound by the River Lea. The open land alongside the Lea was naturally fertilised by the flooding of the river which created an abundance of meadowland providing hay to feed cows, sheep and horses.



Smaller tributaries of the Lea can be seen darting across the map and the flooding of the River Moselle and Stonebridge Brook onto low-lying land provided fertile soil for growing crops. Many familiar place names have their origins in such natural features, for instance the River Moselle can be seen on the map winding around the fields of Broade Waters which lie next to the Downe Hills.

Tottenham's proximity to the City of London also shaped its development. A prominent feature of the map is the road running from Stamford Hill, at the top of the map, down to the border with Edmonton.

Known as both The King's Highway and Tottenham Street (now Tottenham High Road) it lay on the route of Ermine Street, an old Roman Road, and was the major route in and out of London from the north. The 16th century saw a huge explosion in the population of the City of London with the rise of the merchant class and increasing wealth. As the demand for goods increased Tottenham was ideally placed. Inns sprung up along the King's Highway providing food and shelter to those on route whilst surplus produce from the land had a ready market. In 1619 Tottenham Street was thriving.

Villages, Hamlets and Tenants

As buildings sprung up two separate villages developed along the King's Highway. The village of Tottenham Street was situated to the north near the Edmonton border whilst a separate cluster of houses developed around High Crosse Green. In addition to the many inns, there were mansion houses for rich merchants, smaller homes of tradesmen, and alms houses for the poor.

Smaller hamlets are represented by the scatter of buildings around The Hale, West Greene and Wood Greene, but away from the major thoroughfares the map mainly depicts fields and woodland. This was not however 'open' countryside, Tottenham and Wood Green were almost fully enclosed, the majority of the land in the hands of only a few.

Aside from the woodland, the Earl of Dorset leased the Manor Lands to just 18 individuals, most of whom enjoyed leases of 21 years. His tenants included a barber-surgeon, several mercers (merchants specialising in fine textiles), and a goldsmith. In addition to leasing the land, the Manor also operated a system of copyhold or customary lands. Copyhold lands were granted to individuals 'according to the custom of the Manor' who held the land until their death, at which point the land would be 'surrendered' back to the Manor and a new copyholder 'admitted'.

It appears that by the early 17th century this system was being used to favour the rich and powerful, with influential families amassing large quantities of copyhold hand. One such person was Elizabeth Candler. Descended from the wealthy Lock family, and the widow of a mercer, by 1619 Mrs Candler had amassed 345 acres of copyhold land.

Country Retreats

As wealthy courtiers and merchants acquired land in Tottenham and Wood Green, they set about remodelling simple houses transforming them into high status country estates. Clay's plan shows us the beginnings of this gentrification in his depictions of The Parsonage Grounds, Lordship House, Mattysons, and Crooks Farm.

The only one of these to still survive is Lordship House, present day Bruce Castle. Leased to Sir Thomas Penistone, the timber framed house had been rebuilt in bricks fifty years earlier and is described in the Dorset survey as, "The Lordship House. Capital Messuage or Manor House there with Barns, Stables, Dovehouses, Orchards, Garden.". On the ground floor was a long hall (now the Museum's reception area), two parlours, a buttery and a large kitchen with a bakehouse containing a fireplace and bread oven. The room you are standing in was once two separate rooms – if you look down the long walls you can see vertical posts jutting out where a dividing wall once stood. The larger of the two spaces was the great chamber, used for formal entertaining and dining, and other upstairs spaces would have included a withdrawing room and several bed chambers. Further clues to the increasing status of such properties was uncovered in 1998 during archaeological excavations at Moselle Place, once the location of Crooks Farm.

Crook's Farm was the property of Sir Edward Barkham, the largest freeholder in the parish. The owner of a house near High Crofs and 174 acres of land, he purchased the farmhouse shortly before the Dorset Survey was undertaken. Barkham set about renovating it, demolishing internal walls and building a substantial new wing to the south. Associated with this wing, archaeologists found evidence of brick walls, tile hearths, a brick chimney stack and two cellars; as well as large quantities of decorative plasterwork, fragments of panelling and a ceiling boss. Containing both floral motifs and figurative pieces, the plasterwork was extremely high quality and is believed to have been the remains of a fretted ceiling. This type of decorative ceiling was a popular feature of high-status Elizabethan and Jacobean buildings and may originally have been painted.

Working the Land

The survey provides a description of how each piece of land was farmed. Three-quarters of the parish was grassland, much of it given over to pasture. Grazing sheep were kept for their wool, milk and meat, whereas cattle were used to work the land. Higher status houses had fishponds and dovecotes providing a source of fresh food and feathers for cushions. The survey also records a 'connygree' next to Lordship House. A connygree was an enclosed rabbit warren with artificial burrows. Rabbits would be bred and then caught with ferrets and nets to ensure a constant supply of fresh meat and fur for the manor house.

Just over a tenth of the parish was arable land. Crops grown included barley, oats and rye, and vegetables such as parsnips, leeks, peas and beans. Many of the larger houses are listed as having their own orchard. Apples could be used to make cider and other popular fruit trees were pear, plum, mulberry and quince.

There are also a small but significant number of fields marked 'Roses' and it is likely the flowers were farmed to supply the apothecary trade.

Apothecaries prepared and sold medicines to physicians and patients, and rose petals were used to treat ailments as diverse as coughs, inflamed eyes, stomach problems and vomiting. During the late medieval period apothecaries rose in prominence and status and by 1617 were powerful enough to establish their own independent body, The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries. Clay's survey tells us 6 acres of land at Asplins is "now converted into a Garden of Roses", suggesting the landowners of Tottenham were quick to spot commercial opportunities.

‘The Lord Hath a Greate Wood’

Woodland was a valuable commodity and, with the exception of a few privately-owned groves, the areas depicted on the map remained in the hands of the Earl of Dorset. Areas such as Tottenham Wood (today the site of Alexandra Palace) and Hawke Parke (now Downhills Park) were used to entertain important guests, including King James I, and to hunt game such as pheasant, partridge and deer.

Woodland was also highly prized as a source of income. Wood was still the most common building material and the main source of fuel for both heating and cooking. Trees could be felled, and both the timber and the land sold for profit, often at the expense of the local tenants. This was certainly the case with Tottenham Wood which although described in the survey as “a greate wood” had been significantly reduced by previous owners. One former Lord of the Manor, Sir John Risley, had 160 acres of trees cleared in just four years.

Further decreases came with the creation of the New River. Designed to bring fresh water to London, this man-made waterway was constructed between 1609 and 1613. Illustrated on the map, it runs down through Wood Greene and it’s creation necessitated large areas of Tottenham Wood to be cleared so the land could be sold to Hugh Myddleton’s New River Company.

These changing patterns of land use left the poor with little. 16th century manorial rolls detail the meetings of the court held at Bruce Castle and record servants fined for ‘hedgebreaking’ and ‘woodcarrying’ as people desperately tried to source the essentials to survive.

“William Thatcher has pulled out the hedge at Lock medowe”.

The survey itself provides little information on the poor with common land scarce. Represented by the light brown areas on the map, small pockets can be seen at Page Greene, High Crosse Greene, Wood Greene, Ducketts Green, and Smyths Crofs, and were often referred to as ‘waste’, a term that clearly signifies their perceived lack of value.

Recent discoveries

Of all the buildings depicted on the map, Tottenham Mill has the longest documented history and is also the site of the newest discoveries, archaeological excavations having taken place at Hale Wharf in 2018.

The first known mention of a watermill in Tottenham is in land records dating from 1254. Over the centuries the millers were frequently brought before the manor court for misdemeanours with one miller, John Kryton, brought before the court five times. He first appears in 1514 when the mill is described as "ruinous". Ordered to make repairs or be fined, the ruling clearly had little effect as only a year later he is back in court, the mill now "ruinous to the damage of all the inhabitants". Other offences included excessive tolls, and some millers went to great lengths to extort money, for example Thomas Worrell who diverted the millstream causing the river to drain. He then waited for 14 barges to run aground refusing to free the boats until he was paid.

It would appear that the millers had little regard for the rule of law, perhaps the fines imposed had little impact as the recently unearthed archaeology suggests the mill was a highly profitable enterprise. The earliest building discovered was a wooden mill dating to the late 16th or early 17th century. Standing on marshland, the mill required solid foundations and these were made from quernstones, evidence of the earlier mills that once stood on the site. Archaeologists uncovered a pattern of successive rebuilding with materials repeatedly recycled from previous structures to build the next.

Large pieces of millstone called French Burr were discovered. Imported from Northern France to make the finest white flour, these millstones are evidence that the mill was producing luxury items. This flour would have supplied only the wealthier households in the locality with the bulk transported down the River Lea to meet the needs of the growing City of London. The millers lived onsite and personal items found included copper alloy buckles, and an imported chafing dish which would have been used to keep food warm. These were expensive high-status items and reflect the increasing wealth of Tottenham at the time of Thomas Clay's survey.